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Economics and
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Rural and Small Town Population Change, 1970-80

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For the first time in more than 160 years, the population growth rate in the United States was higher in rural and small town communities than in metropolitan areas. Preliminary counts from the 1980 Census of Population show that the nonmetropolitan (rural and small town) counties grew in population by 15.4 percent from 1970 to 1980. This compares with a 9.1-percent increase for metropolitan (city and suburban) counties, and a 10.8-percent increase for the Nation as a whole.

During the 1960's the nonmetropolitan counties had a population increase of just 4.4 percent, whereas metropolitan areas grew by 17.0 percent. Thus rural and small town growth accelerated in the 1970's--despite a decline in the national birth rate--while metropolitan growth declined.

In absolute terms, the number of people in nonmetropolitan counties increased from 54.4 million at the beginning of the 1970's to 62.8 million by 1980. This includes a net of at least 4 million people who moved in from metropolitan areas and abroad. By contrast, in the 1960's, some 2.8 million more people moved out of the rural and small town counties than into them.

However, some of the nonmetropolitan counties have become metropolitan in size and character as a result of their growth and will soon be reclassified as data becomes available.^{1/} A more liberal definition of metropolitan has recently been adopted by the Federal Government which will also contribute to a reduction in the official nonmetropolitan population.

The final U.S. population total in the 1980 Census was 226,504,825, up from 203,302,031 in 1970. Final figures for counties or towns will not be available before spring 1981. The numbers used here are based on a preliminary total of 225.3 million, and are about 0.5 percent short of the final U.S. total. This difference is so slight, however, that trends can be reliably described from the preliminary counts.

In general, all parts of the United States participated in the renewed population growth in rural and small town communities. However, some areas grew rapidly, some grew at a more modest pace, and other counties showed only a reduced rate of decrease rather than absolute growth.

Regionally, nonmetropolitan growth was most rapid in the West, averaging better than 30 percent. In a vast, sparsely populated area embracing western Wyoming, western

^{1/} In general, metropolitan areas contain urban centers of 50,000 or more people. The boundaries are extended to county lines, and adjacent counties are added to the area if they meet certain criteria of worker commuting and metropolitan character. All other counties are nonmetropolitan. Metropolitan/nonmetropolitan status in this report is that of the early 1970's after the criteria in effect at that time had been applied to the 1970 Census.

Colorado, northern Arizona, most of Utah, all of Nevada, and the Sierra Nevada section of California, rural and small town population grew by more than 50 percent during the 10-year period. Energy and other mining developments, resort activities, retirement, urban flight, and comparatively high birth rates were the principal sources of growth in these areas. Other zones of very rapid nonmetropolitan growth include the Florida Peninsula (70-percent increase) and suburbanizing counties that adjoin metropolitan areas throughout the Nation.

At the other extreme, about 485 nonmetropolitan counties had declines in population. These counties were most heavily concentrated in the Great Plains and western Corn Belt, where continued loss of farm population was not offset by nonfarm growth. The only other sizeable block of counties with population loss was in the Mississippi Delta where a combination of agricultural changes and outmovement of Blacks resulted in outmigration that exceeded the excess of birth over deaths. Most of the counties with declining populations had also shown population loss in the 1960's, but at least 800 of those same counties grew during the 1970's.

One of the most notable shifts in population took place in the heart of the southern coal fields. In a 26-county area overlapping the borders of Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia, all but 2 counties declined in population during the 1960's. In the 1970's, as mining revived and other changes occurred, all but one of these counties increased in population. Nonmetropolitan population in this subregion grew by a fifth in the 1970's, after declining by nearly a sixth in the 1960's.

Every State had increases in nonmetropolitan population during 1970-80 except Rhode Island, where population in the only nonmetropolitan county (Newport) fell because of naval base reductions. The most rapid rates of statewide nonmetropolitan growth took place in Nevada and New Jersey (52 percent), followed by Florida (51 percent) and Arizona (50 percent). South Dakota and Iowa, both at less than 2 percent, had the lowest growth rates.

Of the 25 individual metropolitan areas in the country that decreased in population, all but 2 were in the Northeast and the North Central States. Total metropolitan population declined in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. But in each of these States, the nonmetropolitan population grew at a rate above that expected from natural increase (births minus deaths), implying net inmovement of people.

In general, those States that had above average total population growth--largely the States of the South and West--had substantial growth in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. In contrast to the other major regions, the metropolitan growth rate in the South was higher than the nonmetropolitan growth rate.

Although a metropolitan and nonmetropolitan comparison is a convenient way to get a picture of differences between urban/suburban and rural/small town trends when only county data are available, there are millions of rural and small town people who live in the outer zones of metropolitan areas. In fact, some 200 metropolitan fringe counties are either completely or primarily rural. They qualify as metropolitan because of the high percentage of their employed residents who commute to work in metropolitan central counties. Population growth in these counties was typically rapid from 1970 to 1980. Much of the new growth is urban or suburban in form, but much is also rural. More precise information on change in the metropolitan rural population is not yet available.

The most populous nonmetropolitan county in the United States is Ocean County, New Jersey, with a population of 344,000 and growth of 65 percent since 1970. However, this county is increasingly linked with neighboring metropolitan areas and will almost

Continued on page 4--

Population of States, 1980 and 1970, by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan status

Area	Total			Metropolitan ^{1/}			Nonmetropolitan		
	1980	1970	Change	1980	1970	Change	1980	1970	Change
	(Prelim.):			(Prelim.):			(Prelim.):		
	Thou.	Thou.	Pct.	Thou.	Thou.	Pct.	Thou.	Thou.	Pct.
United States	225,299	203,302	10.8	162,494	148,880	9.1	62,805	54,422	15.4
Northeast	49,011	49,061	-.1	41,614	42,480	-2.0	7,397	6,580	12.4
Maine	1,124	994	13.1	344	307	12.0	780	686	13.6
New Hampshire	919	738	24.6	466	363	28.5	453	375	20.8
Vermont	511	445	15.0	--	--	--	511	445	15.0
Massachusetts	5,728	5,689	.7	5,502	5,523	-.4	226	166	36.3
Rhode Island	946	950	-.4	864	855	1.0	81	94	-13.6
Connecticut	3,097	3,032	2.1	2,848	2,804	1.6	249	229	8.9
New York	17,533	18,241	-3.9	15,445	16,290	-5.2	2,087	1,951	7.0
New Jersey	7,336	7,171	2.3	6,707	6,756	-.7	629	415	51.5
Pennsylvania	11,818	11,801	.1	9,437	9,581	-1.5	2,381	2,220	7.3
North Central	58,602	56,590	3.6	39,752	39,107	1.6	18,850	17,483	7.8
Ohio	10,758	10,657	1.9	8,508	8,596	-1.0	2,250	2,061	9.2
Indiana	5,454	5,195	5.0	3,468	3,349	3.6	1,987	1,847	7.6
Illinois	11,326	11,110	1.9	9,061	8,956	1.2	2,266	2,154	5.2
Michigan	9,237	8,882	4.0	7,400	7,354	.6	1,837	1,528	20.2
Wisconsin	4,689	4,418	6.1	2,652	2,578	2.9	2,037	1,840	10.7
Minnesota	4,069	3,806	6.9	2,591	2,417	7.2	1,478	1,389	6.4
Iowa	2,908	2,825	2.9	1,084	1,033	4.9	1,824	1,792	1.8
Missouri	4,899	4,678	4.7	3,067	3,042	.8	1,833	1,636	12.0
North Dakota	652	618	5.6	88	74	19.8	564	544	3.7
South Dakota	688	666	3.3	110	95	15.6	578	571	1.3
Nebraska	1,565	1,485	5.3	689	637	8.2	876	849	3.2
Kansas	2,356	2,249	4.7	1,035	977	5.9	1,321	1,272	3.8
South	74,734	62,813	19.0	47,268	39,353	20.1	27,466	23,460	17.1
Delaware	595	548	8.5	399	386	3.3	196	162	20.9
Maryland	4,192	3,924	6.8	3,529	3,357	5.1	663	567	16.9
Dist. of Col.	638	757	-15.7	638	757	-15.7	--	--	--
Virginia	5,321	4,651	14.4	3,483	3,074	13.3	1,839	1,577	16.6
West Virginia	1,931	1,744	10.7	683	664	2.8	1,248	1,080	15.5
North Carolina	5,842	5,084	14.9	2,652	2,285	16.1	3,190	2,799	14.0
South Carolina	3,061	2,591	18.2	1,472	1,223	20.3	1,589	1,367	16.2
Georgia	5,396	4,588	17.6	3,106	2,594	19.8	2,290	1,994	14.8
Florida	9,579	6,791	41.1	7,951	5,711	39.2	1,629	1,080	50.8
Kentucky	3,642	3,221	13.1	1,620	1,511	7.2	2,022	1,710	18.3
Tennessee	4,539	3,926	15.6	2,692	2,365	13.9	1,847	1,561	18.3
Alabama	3,867	3,444	12.3	2,390	2,129	12.3	1,476	1,316	12.2
Mississippi	2,503	2,217	12.9	560	455	23.1	1,943	1,762	10.3
Arkansas	2,281	1,923	18.6	715	606	18.0	1,566	1,317	18.9
Louisiana	4,194	3,644	15.1	2,660	2,262	17.6	1,534	1,382	11.0
Oklahoma	2,999	2,559	17.2	1,688	1,412	19.5	1,311	1,148	14.2
Texas	14,153	11,199	26.4	11,031	8,563	28.8	3,122	2,636	18.4
West	42,952	34,838	23.3	33,859	27,939	21.2	9,092	6,899	31.8
Montana	784	694	12.9	188	169	11.3	595	525	13.4
Idaho	944	713	32.3	173	112	54.0	771	601	28.3
Wyoming	469	332	41.1	--	--	--	469	332	41.1
Colorado	2,878	2,210	30.3	2,057	1,597	28.8	821	613	34.1
New Mexico	1,295	1,017	27.4	449	333	34.7	847	684	23.8
Arizona	2,714	1,775	52.9	2,037	1,323	54.0	677	453	49.5
Utah	1,459	1,059	37.7	1,153	843	36.7	306	216	41.7
Nevada	800	489	63.8	656	394	66.4	144	94	52.8
Washington	4,110	3,413	20.4	2,927	2,491	17.5	1,183	922	28.3
Oregon	2,617	2,092	25.1	1,566	1,281	22.3	1,051	811	29.6
California	23,517	19,971	17.7	21,717	18,638	16.5	1,800	1,333	35.0
Alaska	400	303	32.3	174	126	37.7	226	176	28.5
Hawaii	965	770	25.3	762	631	20.9	203	139	45.4

-- = Either entirely metropolitan or entirely nonmetropolitan.

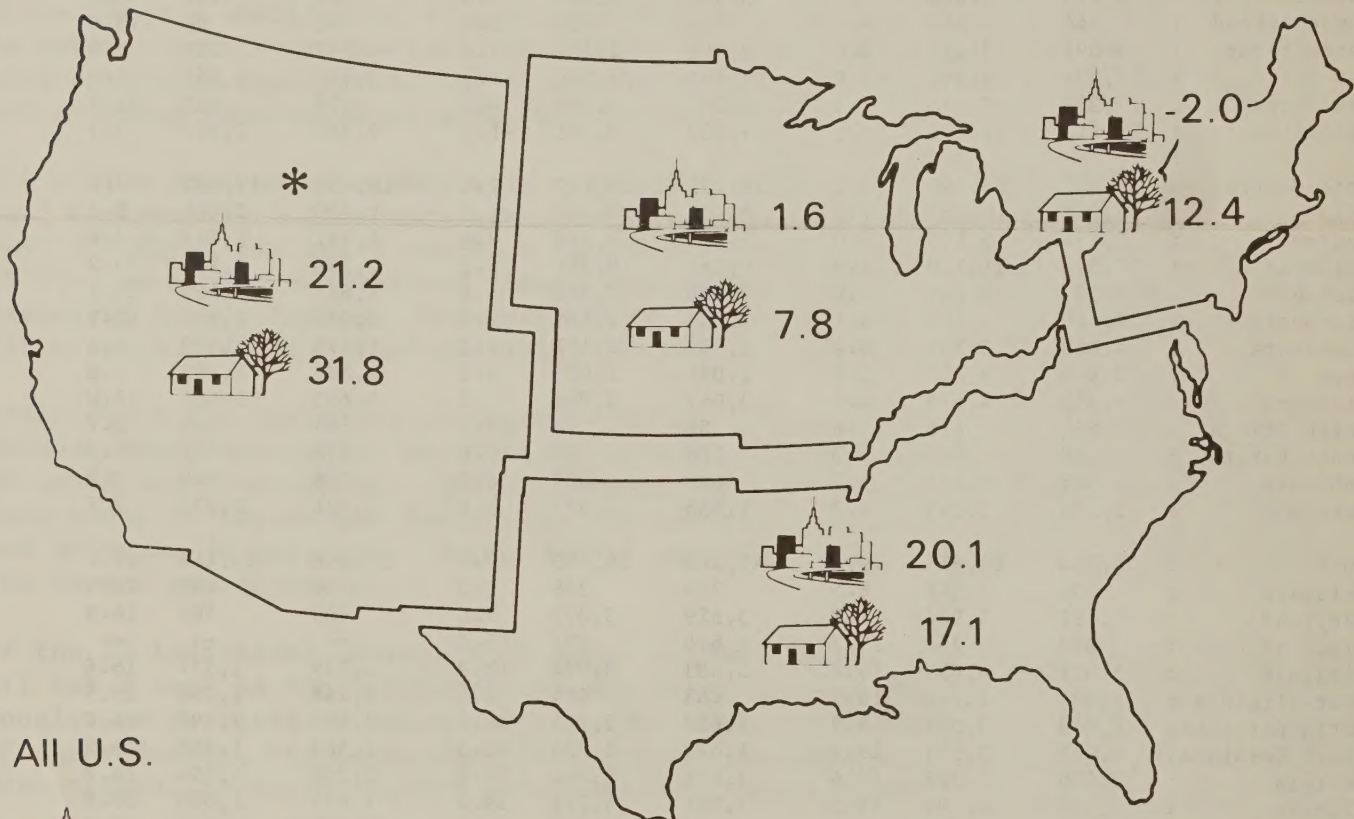
^{1/} Metropolitan status as of 1974.

Source: 1970 and 1980 (preliminary) Censuses of Population.

certainly be reclassified as metropolitan. The smallest county was Loving County, Texas, a ranching area with only 91 people, down by 44 percent since 1970.

In sum, the results of the 1980 Census of Population have fully confirmed the widespread renewal of population growth in rural and small town communities first indicated by estimates and sample surveys in the early 1970's. Additional reports on this subject will be prepared as further Census materials become available.

Regional Population Growth, 1970-80^Δ



* Includes Alaska and Hawaii.

Δ Percentage change

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